

Jefferson County judge executive in your thirties and win, secure reelection, and then launch a bid for U.S. Senator. That is the political path Marlow Cook took, and that is the exact political path I took as well.

Some might say the similarities end there or note that we haven't agreed on every issue in the years since, but what two people ever do? It doesn't change my enduring gratitude for the opportunities Marlow Cook brought to me. It certainly doesn't change my respect for him. This is a man who enlisted in the Navy when his country called and when he was still a teenager.

Marlow Cook served his country honorably in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters in World War II. He served his country honorably in the U.S. Senate.

I should note that Marlow Cook was the first Roman Catholic elected to statewide office in Kentucky. Believe it or not, that was something of an issue back then. It is hard to imagine today.

One more thing. Marlow Webster Cook's impact was felt in the course of the Commonwealth's history in the shape of the riverfront in Louisville. He bought the Belle of Louisville, the sternwheeler that is still going up and down the Ohio River today and is a particularly big thing during the Kentucky Derby week every year.

He had a huge impact on a lot of young Kentuckians, such as myself. I knew his family well. Nancy, his now widow, and his five kids were all running around during that campaign way back then.

I want to say to Nancy and all of Marlow and Nancy's kids how much we admire him. Elaine and I are truly saddened by his loss. We are going to continue to remember this veteran, this extraordinary county official, and our United States Senator fondly. I am sure colleagues will join me in that sentiment. I ask them also to join me in sending our best to all of Marlow's family and friends.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREEMENT—EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, on an entirely different matter, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate, on Monday, February 8, at 5 p.m., proceed to executive session to consider the following nomination: Calendar No. 360; that there be 30 minutes for debate on the nomination equally divided in the usual form; that upon the use or yielding back of time, the Senate vote without intervening action or debate on the nomination; that if confirmed, the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action and the Senate then resume legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Washington.

STUDENT LOAN DEBT

Mrs. MURRAY. Mr. President, last week I asked students and families to share with me their experiences with student loans and college affordability, and I want to start by sharing one of those stories. It is from a young woman named Rebeckah from my home State of Washington. When she was 18, Rebeckah signed up for student loans so she could go to college, and her parents took out what are called PLUS loans to help their daughter afford it. Rebeckah worked hard in college and graduated with her degree. But now she is facing a mountain of student debt, and that is preventing her and her partner from buying a house and starting a family. Not only that, Rebeckah found out that her parents have been taking money out of their retirement savings to pay off their PLUS loans, and they have even resorted to taking a lien out on their home to pay down the debt.

Rebeckah said when she enrolled in college, she was sure that getting a good education would pay off. But now, with all the overwhelming student debt, it feels as if she signed her family up for financial ruin.

When I hear stories like Rebeckah's, it is clear that college costs and student debt are holding families back. I consider it to be one of my most important jobs as a Senator to make sure Washington State families have a seat at the table and a voice in our Nation's Capital, and on an issue as important as this, I am going to make sure their voices are heard loud and clear here in this Congress. I am going to continue to work with my fellow Democrats on ways to make college more affordable. I am going to keep fighting to reduce the crushing burden of student debt for so many families in my home State of Washington and across the country.

Today, the yearly costs of tuition and room and board at a public 4-year institution are 5½ times what they were in the early 1980s. There are many reasons that colleges have gotten more and more expensive, but the result has been the same. It has strained the budgets of middle-class families across the country, and, in some cases, it prevents students from even applying and has forced many others to drop out before they ever earn a degree. With skyrocketing college costs, we are sending the message that college is reserved for the wealthiest few and not for middle-class families and those who want to get there.

We have all heard the numbers of student debt. Overall, Americans hold more than \$1.3 trillion in student loan debt. That is a huge number, and it is actually a little hard to wrap your head around, so let's try this: Every second that goes by, student debt in our country grows by nearly \$3,000. That is every second. And behind those numbers are people who invested in themselves by furthering their education but are now saddled with debt, preventing them from buying a home

or even starting a small business or a family.

A young man from Washington State named Alex told me his income barely covers his monthly expenses, let alone paying down his student loans. He says he feels financially stagnant because "I don't know if I will ever overcome the crippling college debt."

I am glad that Democrats have a plan to help students and families who are in the red. When more students are able to further their education, it doesn't help just them. A highly educated workforce helps our economy grow from the middle out, not from the top down, and it strengthens the workforce we will need to compete and lead the world in the 21st century economy. That is why Democrats want to give students the chance they need to attend community college tuition free.

Of course, many students and families take out student loans to help them finance higher education, but some are locked in with a high interest rate. Today, you can find offers to refinance your mortgage at 3.5 percent or your car loan for around 3.2 percent. I have heard from many borrowers who are paying an interest rate that is twice that amount, and some are paying even more.

Democrats want to make sure that borrowers can refinance their student loans at today's lower rates. We also want to hold the institutions of higher education accountable for providing a high-quality degree so students have confidence that the education they receive and pay for will get them ahead. Democrats want to increase investments in need-based aid, such as Pell grants, so students can keep up with the rising cost of college.

It has been just one week since I asked students and families to submit their stories online to us, and I want to hear from many more because I know there are so many people out there who are struggling. But I must admit, I was taken aback by the constant theme that showed up in so many of the experiences that I have seen so far. I heard story after story from people who said they felt hopeless. They feel buried under student debt, and they see no end in sight. It shouldn't have to be this way. Democrats are offering solutions, and I sincerely hope our Republican friends will join us.

For me, this isn't just another issue; this is really personal. When I was young, my dad was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Within a few short years, he couldn't work any longer, and without warning, my own family had fallen on hard times. My brothers and sisters and I—and I have six brothers and sisters—were all able to afford to go to college with the help of what we now call Pell grants, and my mom was able to get the skills she needed to get a better paying job through a worker training program at Lake Washington Vocational School. This country was there for us and never turned its back on my family.

Today, we can't turn our backs on the millions of families just like mine who need a path forward to pay back their student debt. These students want to stay in school to finish their degree even as the costs go up, and they want to one day be able to save up so their kids can afford to pursue their dreams.

It is time to make college more affordable and make sure students can graduate without the crushing burden of student debt. It is time for Democrats and Republicans to work together on solutions, and it is time to reaffirm that, in our country, earning your degree will pay off for you, your future, and the future of this country.

I thank the Presiding Officer.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. MCCAIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. MCCAIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to address the Senate in morning business and to engage in a colloquy with the Senator from South Carolina, Mr. GRAHAM.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

AMERICAN LEADERSHIP AND SYRIA

Mr. MCCAIN. Mr. President, not surprisingly, the talks that are commonly known as Geneva III, in an effort to stop the ongoing genocide taking place in Syria, have now been "suspended."

I quote from this morning's Washington Post: "Syrian peace talks are suspended before they even really begin."

That should surprise no one. The fact is that the situation on the ground, thanks to our total lack of a coherent strategy or even a serious effort, has resulted in Russian airstrikes, ensuring Bashar al-Assad's continued strength. Along with the Iranians, along with Hezbollah that the Iranians have brought in from Lebanon—they all have given the overwhelming majority position to Bashar Assad, who is not about to leave office with the advantage he has now obtained on the battlefield, to a large degree because of Russian airstrikes that are relentless and that have mostly targeted the Western-backed opposition to Bashar Assad's rule. Those airstrikes, according to the Washington Post, have proven sufficient to push beyond doubt any likelihood that Assad will be removed from power by the nearly 5-year-old revolt against his rule.

The gains on the ground are also calling into question whether there can be meaningful negotiations to end the conflict Assad and his allies now seem convinced they can win.

Let's go back about 4 years. Bashar Assad was about to fall. The President of the United States said that it is not a matter of whether Bashar Assad will fall, it is a matter of when. All the momentum was on their side.

At a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, the Secretary of Defense—then Leon Panetta—said that the departure of Bashar Assad was "inevitable." And then the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said it was inevitable that Bashar Assad will leave.

So a policy which was doomed to failure—rejecting a no-fly zone, rejecting robust training and equipping of those who were seeking to stop the slaughter—has now resulted in what many now view as an international crisis; that is, the refugee problem where millions of refugees are flowing into European countries not just from Syria but primarily from Syria, Iraq, and other countries as far away as Afghanistan. So everyone—especially our European friends—is moaning, and their hearts go out and they are trying to accommodate this.

This is not the cause of the problem; this is the result of a failure of American leadership, a feckless American leadership, and a Secretary of State—this Geneva Convention is not the first or the second but the third time—this is the third time our Secretary of State has convened a whole bunch of people in five-star hotels in Geneva, where, of course, the result has been nonexistent because the facts on the ground favor Bashar Assad, the Russians, and Hezbollah.

So what has happened? Now, for the first time since 1973, when Anwar Sadat threw the Russians out of Egypt, the Russians now have a major role to play in the Middle East. They now have protected their base at Latakia. They now are conducting airstrikes in an indiscriminate fashion against—guess who—not ISIS but against the moderates who were fighting to overthrow Bashar Assad, while our Secretary of State calls him up, has conversations with him, begs them to start peace talks, et cetera. And it goes on.

I think sometimes we all get a little numb, but we shouldn't be numb. We shouldn't be numb to 250,000 killed and slaughtered, chemical attacks that indiscriminately kill men, women, and children. These Russian airstrikes are pervasive in the areas where the moderate opposition exists, and they are using what we call dumb bombs—not the precision bombs—slaughtering hundreds of innocent men, women, and children. Places are surrounded where people are starving to death, and our Secretary of State calls for another meeting in Geneva. It is absolutely remarkable.

I wish to point out again that according to the Washington Post story, Secretary of State John F. Kerry scrambled to rearrange his Thursday schedule after de Mistura—that is the U.N. guy—decided to delay the talks. The article states:

"The continued assault by Syrian regime forces—enabled by Russian airstrikes—against opposition-held areas, as well as regime and allied militias' continued besiegement of hundreds of thousands of civilians, have clearly signaled the intention to seek a military solution rather than enable a political one." . . .

Kerry repeated demands made by the opposition groups as preconditions for negotiations. . . . [but] both the opposition and human rights organizations have cited an increase in Russian bombing over the past several days that they said has targeted civilian areas, including camps for displaced persons in the western part of the country.

Russia maintains that it is only bombing "terrorists," but its definition of that word includes parts of the opposition that has been fighting a civil war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for more than four years, whose representatives are among those on the opposition negotiating team in Geneva.

How can we expect them to negotiate while the Russian airstrikes are intensified? How can we possibly expect something positive to happen, when clearly the momentum and the strength is on the side of the Russians, the Iranians, and Bashar Assad?

Friends, this is another chapter in American history of humiliation and a failure of leadership. Of course, all of that is no better epitomized and symbolized than by what happened when the Iranians captured two American vessels that happened to stray into their territorial waters. Everybody should know that when a ship goes into another country's territorial waters, the first thing to be done is to go out and guide them out of it. It is against international law to take them at gunpoint all over the world but particularly—all over the Middle East is the picture of American servicemen and one woman on their knees with Iranian Revolutionary Guards holding their automatic weapons on them. This is an incredible act of arrogance and a humiliation for our American sailors.

What is the most aggravating is the response by the administration after this totally unlawful action and humiliation of American servicemen and sailors. The response by the administration was—and I am not making this up—White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said that the sailors were offered "the proper courtesy that you would expect." Being held at gunpoint on their knees with their hands behind their neck is, in the words of the White House Press Secretary, "the proper courtesy that you would expect."

The Secretary of State, John Kerry, offered his "gratitude to Iranian authorities for their cooperation in swiftly resolving this matter." That is the American Secretary of State after a gross violation of international law. Our American servicemen are put on their knees by a bunch of two-bit Iranians.

Vice President JOE BIDEN described the incident as "standard nautical practice." The Vice President of the United States says that when you put Americans on their knees and point